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Historical Evolution of the Ram Legend

The evolution of the concept of Ram begins with the tales of a legend-
ary hero and culminates in its becoming a general designation for God
at least in a large part of northern India. The outlines of this histori-
cal development are now fairly clear but may be quite at variance with
the believer's faith which has the capacity to gloss over inconsisten-
cies and has not much use for historical principles.

The ancient Indian tradition has preserved at least three main ver-
sions of the Ram story, the Brahmanical, the Buddhist and the Jaina.
Although the beautiful poem of Valmiki, who is known as the
adikavi, 'the first author of ornate poetry', played a role in stereotyp-
ing the framework of the Ram narrative, traces of earlier divergent
versions may be found in non-Brahmanical, that is, Buddhist and Jain
sources. That there were many versions of the Ram story is tellingly
acknowledged through Sita in the *Adhyatma Ramayana*[1] where she
remarks: 'I have heard many *Ramayanas* from many *dvijas* (twice-
borns), but tell me, did anywhere Ram go to the forest without Sita?'
Sita is inseparable from the Ram story.

Nevertheless, Sita figures both as the sister and wife of Rama in
the *Dasharatha Jataka* which is the earliest documentation of the
Ram legend and retains some very primitive features.[2] Here Ram is a
Bodhisattva, and is the eldest son of Dasharath by his first queen.
Dasharath is the king of Varanasi and not of Ayodhya, and has two
other children from his first queen, Lakhana Kumar and Sita Devi. To
avoid the evil machinations of their stepmother, who wishes to
install her son Bharat Kumar as heir-apparent in place of Ram,
Dasharath sends Ram and Lakhana to exile for twelve years, and Sita
accompanies her brothers. Dasharath dies after nine years and
Lakhana and Sita return to the kingdom, but Ram comes back only
after the completion of twelve years, marries Sita and is crowned king.
He rules for a long time as a wise and benevolent ruler.

It is sometimes argued that by making Sita both the sister and wife
of Ram the narrator of the *Jataka* story has either confused or deliber-

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ately perverted the Brahmanical version and in the process has given it a different locale. But the theme of brother-sister marriage forms a part of the original myth of several prestigious Kshatriya clans, such as the Shakyas and the Lichchhavis in early Pali texts and is meant to emphasise the purity of the lineage. Thus, in the *Digha Nikaya*, one of the earliest Pali canonical texts, the Buddha informs the Brahmana Ambattha that King Okkaka (? Ikshavaku) wanted to give succession to the son of his favourite queen and hence banished his elder children, who took up their dwelling on the slopes of the Himalayas and out of fear of injuring the purity of their line of descent, married their own (*sakahi*) sisters. Their descendants came to be known as Shakyas as they lived at a spot where a mighty Shaaka tree grew.[3] The descent of the Lichchhavis too is traced from a miraculously born twin brother and sister who married each other.[4] Interpreting these myths in terms of 'incestuous' relationship is an anachronistic imposition of social norms of a later period on myths meant to convey a different meaning. It is worth nothing that the Buddha himself belonged to the Shakya lineage which was highly respected by the Buddhists.

In fact, purity of descent was of vital concern to the ruling class of the *gana-rajyas* of the sixth century BC, as access to political power depended on it. Buddhist sources contrast the insistence of the Kshatriyas on the purity of descent on both sides with the practice of contemporary Brahmanas who admitted within their *varna* persons of partial non-Brahmana origin.[5] In any case there is no attempt to denigrate the personality of Ram in the *Dasharatha Jataka* where Ram is explicitly described as the Great Being, *mahasatto*, the Buddha in one of his former births, and the model of Buddhist virtue, who remains unruffled even on hearing the news of his father's death and explains to other grieving persons the impermanence of things.

The legend of Sita being both the younger sister (*kanittha-bhagini*) as well as the chief-queen (*agga-mahesi*) of Ram and famous for her devotion to her husband is incidentally mentioned in the *Vessantara Jataka*.[6] But the Buddhist texts of the later period hardly make any use of the story of Ram, perhaps because once Ram came to be accepted as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Buddhists in India preferred to ignore him. He figures as a Bodhisattva in the *Anamaka Jataka* which was translated into Chinese in AD 251 and which refers to the abduction of Sita and the help received from the monkey-king. But the *Dasharath Kathanam* which was translated into Chinese in AD 472 speaks of Ram as having the valour and prowess of God Narayana (Vishnu). It mentions King Kanishka; hence the original Indian text could not have been written earlier than the second century AD.[7] Later Buddhist works do not mention Ram. Textual analysis has clearly established that Books I and VII of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, where Ram is described

as an incarnation of Vishnu, are later additions,[8] perhaps made around firstsecond centuries AD. Books II–VI, with the exception of a few interpolated passages, depict him simply as an ideal man, the epic hero who is often likened and sometimes equated with the Vedic god Indra.

It is not without significance that the character of Sita is fashioned out of the concept of a Vedic goddess of the same name who is to be invoked at the start of ploughing operations. In the *Grihyasutras* she is described as possessed of radiant beauty and black eyes and is sometimes mentioned as the wife of Indra and Parjanya. Her name signifies 'furrow' and she is the goddess of agriculture. Valmiki calls her *ayonija*, 'not born from the womb', and she does not die but goes underground into the receiving arms of Mother Earth. Her foster-father Janak is plough-bannered. The *Dasharatha* and *Vessantara Jatakas* add *devi* to her name which may not have been simply an honorofic. Her association with Ram and Lakhana as their sister suggests a parallel to the worship of Goddess Ekanamasha along with her brothers Baladeva and Krishna, testified by a number of Kushana sculptures and the *Brihat Samhita* of Varahamihira.[9] Later, in early medieval times, Ekanasha was regarded as identical with Bhadra or Subhadra and worshipped along with Baladeva and Krishna (= Jagannatha) at the Puri temple of Orissa. Interestingly, the Utkala Khanda of the *Skanda Purana* speaks of the goddess flanked by Baladeva and his younger brother Vasudeva in the Puri temple as both the sister and wife of Vasudeva, embodying his energy.[10] Later, the Oriya poet Balaram Das, who composed the Oriya *Ramayana*, identified Ram, Lakshmana and Sita with Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra, in utter disregard of the implications of transforming a sister into a devoted wife!

Divine symbolisms are not exact replicas of accepted societal norms and in fact may be the result of a long process of development. No doubt, Valmiki's epic gave final shape to the character of Sita as the faithful, devoted and long-suffering wife of Ram, but the process of euphemerisation of this goddess seems to have begun long before Valmiki and there are multiple versions of her origin. In a number of Jaina and Brahmanical texts Sita is described as the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari: for example, the *Vasudeva-hindi* of Sanghadasa (c. AD 609), the *Uttara Purana* of Gunabhadra (c. ninth century) and the *Mahabhagavata* (Devi) *Purana*. In the *Adbhuta Ramayana* written in Kashmir she is born of the blood of ascetics collected in a pot by Ravana. Mandodari drank it and gave birth to Sita. In these versions Ravana has her buried in a casket on account of a prophecy that her husband would kill him but Janak finds her while ploughing in a field and adopts her, whereas Ravana falls in love with his own daughter. Some other narratives, such as the

Paumachariya of Vimalasuri and the *Padma Purana* of Ravishena (both are Jaina Ramayanas), follow Valmiki more closely and make Janak the real father of Sita but transfer the incestuous motif in connection with Sita to her long-lost twin brother Bhamandala, who at the instigation of Narada turns up at her *swayamvara* as a suitor! The mystery surrounding the birth of Sita and the introduction of the 'incest' motif in various forms reflects her original divine character.

It is possible to see embedded in the conceptions of Ram, Sita and Lakshmana, or Baladeva, Subhadra (or Ekanamasha) and Krishna, an archaic concept of a female deity flanked by two associate male gods originally her brothers assisting her in her cosmic roles. But later the goddess is subordinated to them and one of her associates rises to the status of her husband, whom she follows in utter devotion in accordance with the patriarchal norms. This hypothesis may explain the overlap of her dual relationship, both as wife and sister, for some time. The contradiction is removed in course of time and she becomes the model of the faithful, obedient wife. In any case, the eulogy of the great mother-goddess called Arya Devi in the *Harivamsa Purana* describing her as the sister of Mahendra and Vishnu[11] is again reflective of a matriarchal form of worship, faint traces of which may be discerned only by reading against the grain.

It has been said that Valmiki wrote in the context of the rising tide of Buddhism, which preached moral values and stressed the ideals of celibacy and monkhood. As opposed to this Valmiki presented through his poem the Brahmanical ideal of virtue exalting the householder's stage of life, and he provided a role model for all kinds of relationships: father, son, mother, wife, friend, and so on. Weaving together the legendary tales centering around Ayodhya, Kishkindha and Lanka, his epic created a fascinating saga in which the norms of a patriarchal *varna*-based society are upheld by various characters at the cost of a great deal of personal and dramatic appeal. Henceforth the basic plot of the Ram story becomes fixed but variations were still possible and have been made down to the present century both in literature and folklore.

The original poem of Valmiki, leaving out the first and the last books, is supposed to have been composed between the third century BC and the second century AD. By the end of the second century it had already become so popular that the *Kalpana-Mandatika*, a text written towards the close of the second century, speaks of its public recital.[12] It is significant that the other great epic, the *Mahabharata*, was also being refashioned about the same time.[13] V.S. Sukthankar,[14] the celebrated editor of the major portion of the critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, was firmly of the view that the *Mahabharata* was not an odd conglomerate of amorphous literature patched together but a harmonious work having an organic unity and a conscious design. He

gives the credit of transforming a heroic poem of 24,000 verses dealing with the Kaurava-Pandava war into a *Dharmashastra* consisting of nearly one lakh verses to a band of inspired Bhargava poets who were partial to the cult of Narayana-Vishnu and sought to teach and propagate Brahmanical social ethics through a popular medium. Sukthankar regards the *Bhagavadgita* as the keystone of this remodelled version embodying its central message. In our opinion this laid the foundation of what later came to be regarded as 'classical Hinduism'.

The composition of two major epics presenting the ideal of Brahmanical social ethics and piety about the same time was not a fortuitous phenomenon but the response of Brahmanical intellectuals to a situation of crisis. We have argued elsewhere[15] that in the centuries immediately preceding and succeeding the Christian era Vedic Brahmanism faced a major threat, as animal sacrifices were no longer popular and in demand and the onslaught of Buddhism and other heterodox sects had undermined the prestige and authority of the Brahmanas and *varna* hierarchy. The earlier close link of the *brahma* and the *kshatra*, the priestly and the ruling powers, so typical of later Vedic polity, is not in evidence in post-Vedic times and the capture of political power by the Greeks, Scythians, Kushanas and other foreign invaders, who came in large numbers and adopted Buddhism and the cults of popular divinities, meant further loss of patronage to Vedic priests. Vedic ritual and intellectual tradition had by now become too rigid and inflexible to accommodate well-known foreign communities who had both political power as well as wealth owing to their participation in the growing nexus of trade and the processes of urbanisation, which factors also brought about an improvement in the condition of artisans and craftsmen traditionally ranked as low in the Brahmanical social hierarchy and neglected in the Vedic religious tradition. Brahmanical thinkers and social reformers met these challenges by shifting the emphasis from the Vedic ritual of sacrifice to devotional image-worship of popular deities identified as forms of Vedic gods and goddesses and made their Brahmanised worship accessible to all irrespective of caste, community and gender.

The framework of classical Hinduism which shows utter 'tolerance' or flexibility in matters of belief and symbols of devotion but enjoins rigid adherence to the traditional functions and customs of one's caste while upholding the hierarchy of Brahmanical and patriarchal social norms evolved in the circumstances described above. Both the epics played a major role in the formation and dissemination of this ideological pattern. However, it is generally believed that the identification of Ram as an incarnation of Vishnu and the introduction of Vaishnavite elements in the *Ramayana* is a later development. Apparently this happened after the identification of the popular god

Vasudeva-Krishna with the Vedic deity Narayana-Vishnu and the resultant evolution of the doctrines of incarnation in Bhagavatism, which was the earlier form of Vaishnavism. Although traditionally the Ram incarnation is supposed to have preceded Krishna incarnation, inscriptional evidence proves the identification of Krishna with Vishnu in the second and first centuries BC, while the identification of Ram with Vishnu seems to have taken place only around or after second century AD with the growing popularity of Valmiki's epic and emergence of the synthetic Brahmanised cult of Krishna-Vishnu. The *Mahabharata* gives the story of Ram following largely the *Ramayana* of Valmiki but differs in certain details. However, this only shows that the remodelled *Bharata* epic continued to receive additions and interpolations of episodes, anecdotes and individual passages even after its initial promulgation. Differences could be accounted for by presuming that the composer of the Ramopakhyana of the *Mahabharata* relied on a variant text of Valmiki's epic. Or, he may have felt free to invent certain alterations in the genealogy of Ram and make Vibhishana the stepbrother of Ravana rather than depicting him as his real brother as mentioned by Valmiki.

More intriguing is the brief narrative in the *Bhagavata Purana*, which in contradiction to Valmiki's version of the episode, describes Ram himself as cutting off the nose of Shurpanakha in two passages.[16] Valmiki attributes this act of brutality to Lakshmana, albeit on the orders of Ram. Apparently the audience which heard the Puranic stories regarded mutilation as just punishment for a bold, shameless woman, so the author of the *Bhagavata Purana* saw nothing wrong in foisting this exploit on Ram himself. Most other Brahmanical versions of the Ram story, including Tulsi's *Ramcharitmanas*, credit this act to Lakshmana acting on the advice of Ram and use this incident to expatiate on the frailty and evil nature of woman.

The Brahmanical orientation of the Ram saga created strong reactions in non-Brahmanical circles, and whereas the Buddhists stopped making use of the Ram legend after second century AD in India, the Jainas composed their own Ramayanas contesting the Brahmanical characterisation of key characters and using the story to propagate their own value-system. In the Jaina Ramayanas Ram is a non-violent follower of the teachings of Mahavira Jaina and it is Lakshmana who kills Ravana. Again, unlike in the Brahmanical versions, Ravana is not evil incarnate, but a great, noble and learned person. His only weakness is his passion for Sita. He is one of sixty-three great men described by Hemachandra in his *Trishashti-shalaka-purusha-charita*. Similarly, Shurpanakha is called Chandranakha in the Jaina accounts which do not speak of her disfigurement. Her son Shambuka is killed by Lakshmana in the Dandaka forests, so she accosts the two brothers, becomes infatuated and is insulted by them. She complains to

her brother Ravana who decides to avenge the insult. The Jaina works were composed and recited in constant competition and confrontation with Brahmanical works, and an element of counter-culture is conspicuous among them. Several of their works are known as *prati-puranas* or counter-Puranas and they have mocked and parodied Puranic stories. Nevertheless, the Ram story occupies an important place in their religious tradition and the Jaina Ramayana written by the poet Ravishena and titled as the *Padma Purana* or *Padma-Charita* is esteemed by the Jains in the same fashion as the Hindus esteem the *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsi. A copy of its Hindi translation is to be found in all the Jaina temples.[17]

The available Jaina versions of the Ram story are certainly latter than the *Ramayana* of Valmiki and broadly speaking follow the same plot but some of these may be said to have access to some independent versions too. Thus the *Uttara Purana* of Gunabhadra seems to synthesise the Buddhist and Brahmanical versions of the Ram story by making Dasharath a king of Varanasi, who later changes his capital to Ayodhya. After the marriage of Ram to Sita Dasharath makes Ram his crown-prince and sends him to Varanasi to look after his subjects there. Sita and Lakshmana accompany Ram. We have already mentioned that in this work Sita is the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari and Janak is her foster-father.

Some other variations in the legend of Ram are linked with the growth of the concept of *bhakti*, particularly of *Ram-bhakti*. Thus initially Valmiki speaks of Ram as a partial incarnation of Vishnu representing one-fourth his potency. Each of the three other sons of Dasharath too have one-fourth of Vishnu's essence in them.

However, in the Valmiki *Ramayana* itself there are passages identifying Ram as the complete, total incarnation of Vishnu. The development has its parallel in the Krishna cult. Initially Krishna is said to incarnate one black hair of Narayana and Baladeva one grey hair. But later, Krishnavatara is regarded as the absolute incarnation of Vishnu in all his potency.[18]

The exaltation of Ram as the complete incarnation of Vishnu had significant theological and philosophical implications and contributed to the multiplicity of the Ram symbolism. Thus at one level he was a perfect human being acting as an exemplar, at another level he was God both transcendent as well as immanent, the highest self without beginning. The concept of Sita too undergoes corresponding evolution and at the higher level she is conceived as the creative energy, the *shakti* or power, of cosmic Ram. In the *Adbhut Ramayana* written in Kashmir under Tantric influence, she even dominates over Ram. The work claims to be the eighth *kanda* (book) of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Later the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, which deeply influenced Tulsi, integrated the Vedantic, Puranic and Tantric concepts of absolute real-

ity in its conception of Ram and Sita and while sticking by and large to the structure of Valmiki's narrative, imbued it with new meanings. The *Adhyatma Ramayana* became the 'scripture' of the Ramanandi sect in North India and may have influenced Kabir in choosing the name of Ram as the general designation of God.[19] However, although his God was merciful and loving, he was formless and not a son of Dasharath or an *avatara* of Vishnu. Kabir was fighting against the inequalities of the contemporary social system. Hence, his Ram could not have been the Ram of Valmiki who was great champion of Brahmanical orthodoxy and could behead a Shudra ascetic for committing the sin of transcending his *varna* rights. However, the BJP's attempt to transform Ram into a unitary symbol of 'Hindu nationalism' have political rather than social or religious aims in view.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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